[A Barre Family]

Miss Mari Tomasi DATE: AUG 23 1940 “Men Against Granite”

A BARRE FAMILY

After four in the afternoon the Italian north end of Barre's Main Street became a confusion of traffic noises. Pedestrians lined the walks, many of them granite workers in chalked clothing, loud-voiced, glad to soak up the air. A sun, unusually hot for early May, beat upon the din. The florist's window was a haven of still beauty and coolness. A young woman in a flowered smock bent over a vase of tea roses. Her hands hovered over the blossoms, teasing a green leaf to a background position. She and her husband owned the shop. Most of the plants and flowers on display came from their own nurseries south of Barre.

The girl was in her early thirties. She was Joanna Loeti before her marriage. She had lived here all her life, with the exemption of four school years at Smith's,? Smith and she'd been in contact with many stonecutters' families. But none of the Leotis in Barre had worked in granite.

“The first Leoti to come to Barre was great-uncle Pietro. Around 1880. It was not only a better living he was after, he was young and eager for travel and new sights. His father was a business man, well off, owner of a furniture store, a coal business, and a cheese factory. They lived in Turin, and had a summer home in the Alpine foothills where the factory was located. The father was a domineering man, level headed in business. But his frequent visits to Monte Carlo, and it was 2 no short distance for those days, were the despair of his brother, a local priest. The year before Pietro left for America, the father gambled away his cheese factory. Pietro's schooling ended with the sixth grade. Working for his father proved unsatisfactory, and at twenty without assistance from his father, or consent he sailed for America. He had little money above the expenses of the trip. New

York became his destination. His first job was with an Italian fruit vendor. He lived frugally, hated the turmoil of city life, and especially the chicanery of the Neapolitan colony with whom circumstances forced him to live. He heard stories of the hills of Vermont, the white winters and pleasant summers like those of his northern home, and of northern Italians who were flocking to the valley-town of Barre to work the granite of encompassing hills. The next year he managed to go to Barre. He found his own people congenial, and the town in the boom days of its granite activities, ideal for a business venture. And beyond the town limits, green stretches, forests, and the quiet he loved. Granite work didn't interest him. His miserable experience in New York served him in good stead. He would sell fruit, be his own boss. With a makeshift cart he covered the same route daily: the homes in the morning; the stone sheds at the noon hour; the town's business streets in the afternoon. He did unbelievably well, for in another year's time he opened a small store. Five years later he visited Italy, married a girl from his home town, and returned to Barre, bringing with him a brother. Pietro was instrumental in bringing his remaining three brothers here, and of financing stores for them in Barre and Montpelier. After 3 they were married, they sent for young men and women from the Piedmont section of Italy to work as clerks and housekeepers. They were treated as members of the family. There are at least five instances where Dominic and his brothers helped the clerks to open stores of their own. Today the Leotis and their descendants are scattered in more than a dozen Vermont towns.

“Pietro and two brothers built three business and apartment buildings on Barre's Mains Main Street. This was in the late nineteenth century. The present generation tends to turn from real estate and stores. Some of the girls have taught here at Spaulding High School, the boys have gone in for dentistry and medicine. This flower shop is part of the building Old Pietro built. It's my mother's now. We've always had stonecutters' families for tenants. Italian, French, Scotch. The building is only a few minutes' walk from the sheds; but most granite workers, if they can save the money, prefer to buy or build small homes of their own where they can breathe fresh air and work patches of earth for vegetables and

flowers. I've seen families move from the building on a day's notice because the neighbor across the hall, a stonecutter, was racked with lingering morning coughs. You hated to lose good tenants, but you couldn't blame them for fearing t.b. for themselves and their children. Living in Barre for more than a quarter of a century you can remember whole families that have been wiped out by it.

“We've hard working, honest tenants. They pay their rent regularly. During the last big strike, about six years ago, we kept three families who couldn't pay their rent. They paid up every cent when the men went to work again. 4 “I remember little of the strike of the '20's, except the street riots, the police, guards, the parade of French who were brought here to break the strike. It was a thrill to wake in the morning and wonder what new disaster had happened during the night: a shed ruined? a scab worker injured? his home attacked? My mother has often mentioned its effects on the tenants. For a long period we had four families of granite workers. Soon after the strike a French family moved in. When the other tenants learned that he had been a strike breaker, they protested and threatened to leave unless the new tenant was put out. Of course, she had to ask the French tenant to leave. She tells, too, of a French mother of six children. Her husband had worked scab. There'd been sickness in the family and she had to help with the household earnings. She made stonecutters' aprons of heavy, striped, canvas-like cloth and she asked us to sell them for her in the store. My mother did this, but she kept the seamstress' name from her customers. They wouldn't have bought aprons from a strike breaker's wife.

“The granite workers don't treat themselves to flowers. No, indeed. Except on such special occasions as Christmas, Easter and Mothers' Day. They have more substantial uses for their money. But at funerals they buy the most beautiful and the most expensive floral displays they can afford. Especially the Italian and the Spanish. Sometimes these flowers are bought on credit and paid for when the dead man's insurance is received.

Majority of stonecutters have insurances other than that of the Union. They know their deaths are apt to be premature, they want to see their families protected. Just lately I read

5 and explained a policy to a tenant who speaks little English. Stonecutters' rates are high. In this company the life insurance rate for stonecutters of 36 years of age in $8.00 a year more than the usual, per $1,000. For a man of 25, $6.40 yearly is added to the usual rates. For lumpers, whose labor is less hazardous, rates are lower.

“The widows hang oh desperately to these bits of insurance, bank it if they can, and look for other means of support. A few resort to the sale of wine, grappa, and whiskey in their homes. If they are raided they pay the fine, and after a brief lull start the sales again."

Joanna spoke of her teaching days at Spaulding High School. “I taught there three years. For the most part these stone-working immigrants give their children a good education. Some prepare for colleges and universities; most of them take commercial courses. But Barre offers few office jobs. Many, especially the girls, commute to Montpelier—to the State House and the National Life Insurance offices. The boys are reared in a horror for the hazards of shed life, they refuse to do granite work, nor do their parents want them to. They want white collar jobs. A few find openings as salesmen for granite sheds and quarries. Many drift to the cities. During prohibition high school graduates—many of them Italian and Irish— did bootlegging. It offered adventure, excitement, a good profit, it kept them from the sheds, and for the time being solved the problem of seeking work in other cities.

“Our Italian tenants feel bad about the part Italy is taking in this war. Many of the stonecutters are northern born. 6 Near the French border. They've always had pleasant relations with the European French. They admire Mussolini for the fine changes he has made in Italy — the construction of highways, compulsory education, and so forth, but they feel he's gone too far this time. They regret this war. Some have brothers in Italy, with sons the ages of their own sons. If the United Staten is brought into the war these cousins will be fighting each other. I've heard them talk: Italy was their first home, and they would like to be loyal, but America is their new home, their families, property, friends and

interests are here. Their sympathy is torn between them and they keep hoping that the United States will keep out of the war.”